

Jerusalem Perspective

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Semitic Background to the Nain Story

The short account of the resurrection of the widow's son in Nain (Luke 7:11-17) has a very Semitic feeling. If the Nain story was written originally in Greek, it is a very semitically flavored Greek. Several linguistic features of this story suggest that it may have been written originally in Hebrew.

Noun—Adjective

Languages often vary widely in the way they order the parts of a sentence. One of the first things an English-speaker notices when he begins studying Semitic languages such as Hebrew is that nouns precede adjectives.

The Hebrew-speaker places the noun first and then describes it, adding modifying adjectives one after the other. For example, where an English-speaker would say "good morning" or "good evening," the normal Hebrew phrase is "בוקר טוב," literally "morning good," or "ערב טוב," "evening good."

The literal translation of the Nain story, later in this article, shows that Hebraic noun-adjective word order predominates.

Verb—Subject

Word order in Greek is very flexible because suffixes are used to make it clear whether a word is the subject, the object, or the verb of the sentence. Still there is a certain usual pattern, and in classical Greek the subject appears before the verb more than 80% of the time.

In Semitic languages, however, the verb generally appears before

the subject. If the subject appears first, it usually is because the subject is being specially emphasized. The priority of the verb is one of the distinguishing features of Semitic languages.

It is this same verb-subject sentence structure which one finds throughout the Nain story (see literal translation).

Well Connected

Another characteristic of Hebrew is the repeated use of the conjunction *and*. Although a simple device, it is known technically by the fearful-looking word polysyndeton. This syntactic feature is common to all Semitic languages.

Not just sentences, but often paragraphs, chapters and books begin in Hebrew with *vav*, the Hebrew word usually translated as *and*. Fifteen of the thirty-nine books of the Hebrew Bible begin with this word. Polysyndeton also is very prominent in the story of the healing of the widow's son at Nain, which uses *and* twenty times in just seven verses.

This "and...and...and" pattern is one of the hallmarks of Semitic syntax, but seldom appears in

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Jesus in Judea

Did Jesus ever conduct a teaching tour of the towns and villages of Judea before his final fateful visit to Jerusalem?

Many scholars believe that the synoptic Gospels hold little evidence that Jesus ever toured Judea. Robert Lindsey, the co-ordinator of the Jerusalem School, disagrees. He believes that there is sufficient evidence in Matthew, Mark and Luke to support a Judean ministry, and that Judea is the setting of many of the Gospel stories.

Where was Nain?

One piece of evidence for Jesus' Judean ministry is found in the story of the widow's son at Nain. According to Luke's account (7:11-17), the news that the widow's son had been raised from the dead spread throughout Judea. The city in which the widow and her son lived therefore would seem to have been in Judea rather than the Galilee.

The name Nain, נעין (*na·'in*) or נעים (*na·'im*, pleasant), appears only once in rabbinic literature (Genesis Rabbah 98:12). In this passage, it appears in the context of several other places located in the vicinity of Nazareth and Mount Tabor. This rabbinic Nain therefore is probably to be identified with the modern Arab village of Nein, located about five and a half miles southeast of Nazareth.

However, there is also a Nain

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in Judea. Josephus mentions it in his account of the zealot Simon bar Giora's raids in 69 A.D. throughout the province of Judea:

At a village called Nain, he erected a wall and used the place as a fortress to secure his position, taking advantage of the many convenient caves in the gorge known as Pheretae.... There too he...billeted most of his troops. His object was obvious: he was training his army in preparation for an attack on Jerusalem. (War IV, 511-513)

Wadi Kelt

In this account of bar Giora's fortification of Nain, Josephus mentions the numerous caves nearby in a ravine named Pheretae. The Judean Nain probably was located in the canyons of the desert to the east of Jerusalem, since the caves of that area have always served as a refuge for insurgents. Also, since Simon positioned his army in preparation for an attack on Jerusalem, Nain must have been within striking distance. Again, this points to the western edge of the Judean desert.

Scholars usually identify Pheretae—which may reflect the Hebrew name פרת (*pe-RAT*), possibly the Perath of Jeremiah 13:4-7—with a rugged canyon known today by its Arabic name of Wadi Kelt. It stretches for some ten miles across the Judean Desert from a point six miles northeast of Jerusalem to its outlet near Jericho.

JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE

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It may be possible to identify the New Testament Nain with the Nain of Josephus. Furthermore, it would seem that this Nain may have been located near Wadi Kelt, as near as six miles from Jerusalem. If this is the case, then at least one of Jesus' miracles was performed in Judea, and there is the possibility of locating more of his ministry in that region.

Semitic Background

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European languages such as Greek. It is surprising, therefore, to find this word pattern in many parts of the Greek New Testament texts. The fact that this pattern appears so frequently in the Greek texts of Matthew, Mark and Luke is one of many indications that a Semitic document lies behind the synoptic Gospels.

Literal Translation

The following literal translation of the Greek text reveals these three Hebraic characteristics: noun-adjective word order; verb-subject word order, and repeated use of the conjunction *and*.

[11] and it happened soon afterward that he went to a city called Nain and went with him his disciples and crowd large [12] and as he neared the gate of the city and behold was being carried out dead an only son of his mother and this was a widow and crowd large of the city was with her [13] and seeing her the Lord he pitied her and said to her do not cry [14] and going up he touched the bier and the bearers stood and he said young man to you I say arise [15] and sat up the dead man and began to speak and he gave him to his mother [16] and seized fear them all and they began to praise God saying prophet great was raised in our midst and visited God his people [17] and went forth word this in all Judea and all the surrounding country

Two Other Semitisms

It is quite possible that the first verse of this passage contains another Semitism. To explain, it is necessary to introduce one other

frighteningly technical word.

Hendiadys isn't just the jumble of letters it looks like. It literally means "one by two," and it is a figure of speech in which two terms connected by *and* are used to qualify each other and express a single concept. This occurs commonly in Hebrew, as for example in Genesis 12:1: "From your land *and* from your birthplace" which means "from your native land."

If "his disciples and a large crowd" is an example of hendiadys, as seems possible, the phrase actually would mean "a large crowd of his disciples."

One other Semitic figure of speech found in the Nain passage is parallelism. The repetition of synonymous thoughts is unnecessary in Greek and other European languages, but poetry in Hebrew.

"Prophet great was raised in our midst!" and "visited God his people!" are quoted as if the people said two different things. However, if one assumes that the Greek text represents a Hebrew original, then the second exclamation would mean the same as the first.

Idiomatic Translation

Let's retranslate this passage into more idiomatic English, taking into account the Hebraic undertext of the passage as a whole. Many of the *ands* have been removed. This is because Hebrew frequently uses a *vav* where in English no word would be used at all, and in such cases the best translation is simply to drop the *and* entirely.

Shortly afterward, accompanied by a large crowd of his disciples, he went to the city of Nain. As he approached the city gate, he met a funeral procession. The dead man was the only son of a widow, and a large crowd from the city was with her. When the Lord saw her his heart went out to her.

"Don't cry," he said.

Then he went up and touched the bier, and the men who were carrying it halted.

"Young man," he said, "I command you, get up!"

The dead man sat up and
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Hebrew Nuggets

Many of Jesus' words were spoken against a profoundly Hebraic background. We believe that a knowledge of Hebrew is central to understanding much of what Jesus said, and what was written about him in the Gospels. This is the second of a series of articles about the Hebrew language. Hopefully these "nuggets" will encourage you to explore the riches Hebrew-study can offer to those who want to understand the Bible more fully.

Lesson Two: tse-RE

The second sound in Jesus' Hebrew name, יֵשׁוּעַ (ye-SHU·'a), is a vowel. Hebrew vowels are represented by signs which are generally placed under or sometimes to the left of the letter. They are pronounced after the letter that carries the sign.

The vowel we consider in this lesson is called tse-RE, and takes the form of two horizontal dots appearing under the yod, the first letter in יֵשׁוּעַ. In the system of transliteration used in JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE, this vowel is represented by the letter "e." When unaccented, as here in the name ye-SHU·'a, it is pronounced almost like the "e" in the word "net."

By the way, we do not capitalize the first letter in the transliteration of any Hebrew name, because Hebrew does not have capital letters. We use capital letters in our system of transliteration only to indicate accented syllables.

In our previous lesson, we explained how the original "y"

sound of the first letter of Jesus' name is mispronounced in today's English as a "j" sound. In a similar way, English speakers mispronounce the first vowel sound in Jesus' name as a long "e," as in the word "me."

Before this Hebrew name was transliterated into English, it was first transliterated to Greek. There was no difficulty in transcribing the tse-RE sound since the ancient Greek language had an equivalent letter which represented this sound. And there was no real difficulty in transcribing the same vowel into English. The translators of the earliest versions of the English Bible transliterated the יֵשׁוּעַ with "e."

Unfortunately, later English speakers guessed wrongly that this "e" should be pronounced as in "me," and thus the first syllable of the English version of ye-SHU·'a came to be pronounced "Jee." It is this pronunciation which produced such euphemistic profanities as "Gee" and "Geez."

Since ye-SHU·'a is spelled "Jeshua" and not "Jesus" in most English versions of the Old Testament (for example in Ezra 2:2 and II Chronicles 31:15), one easily gets the impression that the name is never mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet ye-SHU·'a appears there twenty-nine times, and is the name of at least five different persons and one village in the southern part of Judah.

In contrast to the early biblical period, there were relatively few different names in use among the Jewish population of the Land of Israel at the time of the Second Temple. The name Jesus was one of the most common male names in that period, tied with Eleazar for fifth place behind Simon, Joseph, Judah and John. In fact, in a study by Rachel Hachlili ("Names and Nicknames of Jews in Second Temple Time," *Eretz-Israel*, Vol. 17, pp. 188-211) in which she surveyed the literary and epigraphical sources of Jesus' day, she found that nearly one out of every ten persons known from the period was named Jesus.

In the first lesson we learned the consonant yod, which represents the "y" sound in Hebrew. In this lesson we have learned the vowel representing the "e" sound. Together, they form י (ye), the first syllable of יֵשׁוּעַ. In the next issue of JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE we will learn about the second of the three syllables which make up Jesus' Hebrew name.

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began to speak, and Jesus presented him to his mother. The crowd was awe-struck, and they began to praise God: "God has sent the Messiah!"

News of this miracle spread throughout Judea and beyond.

You will notice that "prophet great was raised in our midst!" and "visited God his people!" have not only been combined into one statement, but have been translated "God has sent the Messiah!" This may seem a startling alteration, but it is not without justification. The explanation is provided in the following article, "Prophet as a Messianic Title."

"Prophet" as a Messianic Title

Jesus spoke of himself using many messianic titles from Scripture. Names such as Son of Man in Luke 19:10, the Green Tree in Luke 23:31, and the King in Matthew 25:34 all have their origins in messianic passages from the Hebrew Scriptures.

Jesus was also referred to by such messianic titles as Lord (Luke 5:8), the Son of God (Luke 1:35) and the Son of David (Luke 18:38).

Jesus the Prophet

One title applied to Jesus is not so clearly messianic: "Prophet." There can be little doubt that Jesus viewed himself as a prophet, and that many of his contemporaries concurred. Jesus claimed to be a prophet when he quoted the popular saying, "No one is a prophet in his own town," going on to compare himself to Elijah and Elisha (Luke 4:24-27). He made the same claim when he said, "It cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem" (Luke 13:33).

But what did the people of Nain have in mind when they

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"Prophet" as Messianic Title

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exclaimed, "A great prophet has been raised in our midst!"? Since they had just witnessed the bringing to life of a dead man, a miracle that also had been performed by Elijah (I Kings 17:17-24) and Elisha (II Kings 4:18-37), one might conclude that the people viewed Jesus as a prophet of the stature of these or other biblical prophets. However, the language of their exclamation suggests a connection with a Bible passage which points to a more radical conclusion.

Prophecy of Moses

Moses tells the people in Deuteronomy 18:15 (in literal translation): "A prophet from your midst, from your brothers, like me, will raise for you the LORD your God. To him you must listen."

These words and those used by the inhabitants of Nain are too similar to be coincidental. Both passages speak of "a prophet" in the singular and without the definite article; the Deuteronomy passage has "will raise" and "from your midst" while the Lukan passage has "has been raised" and "in our midst."

Moses' statement in Deut. 18 perhaps originally referred to his successor, Joshua. Surprisingly, however, one does not read at the end of the book of Deuteronomy that Joshua was a prophet like Moses, but rather, "Since then no prophet has arisen in Israel like Moses...no one has ever shown the mighty power and performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel" (34:10,12).

This statement may have indicated to some that the "prophet like Moses" was not Joshua but someone yet to come. In the post-biblical period, Moses' statement often was interpreted as referring to a Messianic figure: the "Second Moses," the "Prophet of the Last Days."

First & Last Redeemers

In his book *The Messiah in the Old Testament and Rabbinical Writings*, Risto Santala points out

an intriguing rabbinic interpretation which supports the idea that the Messiah would be a prophet comparable to Moses:

Like the first redeemer so is the last redeemer. Just as it is said of the first redeemer, "And Moses took his wife and sons and put them on a donkey" [Ex. 4:20], so it is said of the last redeemer, "Gentle and riding on a donkey" [Zech. 9:9]. (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:9)

This interpretation, attributed to Rabbi Isaac, cannot be dated before the end of the third century A.D., but it may have originated in an earlier period. Notice how the "last redeemer," the humble Messiah who comes riding on a donkey, is compared to the "first redeemer," Moses. It is interesting that Stephen also referred to Moses as "redeemer" in his speech to the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:35).

Greater than Moses

According to the rabbis, אין בישראל גדול ממנו (En be-yis-ra-EL ga-DOL mi-ME-nu), "There is no one in Israel greater than him [i.e., Moses]" (Mechilta to Ex. 13:19). However, as Jerusalem School scholar Dr. Bradford Young pointed out in a recent lecture before the Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity in Jerusalem, there is a rabbinic tradition which refers to the Messiah as being more exalted than Moses:

It is written, "Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubabel you will become level ground" [Zech. 4:7]. What is "Who are you, O great mountain"? This is the King Messiah. And why is he called "a great mountain"? Because he is greater than the patriarchs...elevated beyond Abraham, exalted above Moses and superior to the ministering angels. (Tanhuma, Toledot 20)

This tradition of exalting the Messiah above Moses may be the reason the Nainites added "great" to their allusion to Moses' prophecy. It is interesting that the angel Gabriel promised Mary that Jesus would be "great" (Luke 1:32).

A Trustworthy Prophet

Since of Moses it was said, "He is trusted throughout my house" (Numbers 12:7), the "prophet of the last days" came to be regarded, like Moses, as the "trustworthy prophet."

The book of I Maccabees shows that even a century or more before the time of Jesus there was the expectation among the people that God would send this "trustworthy prophet." In 140 B.C., a great assembly of the people and its leaders resolved that Simon the Maccabee would be "their leader and High Priest for ever, until a trustworthy prophet will arise" (14:41). This is a reference to the "prophet like Moses" who would one day appear.

In line with this theology, Hebrews 3:1-6 makes a comparison between Moses and Jesus emphasizing the trustworthiness of Moses and Jesus.

Messiah: The Prophet

Some of the strongest evidence for the existence of the belief that the Messiah was expected to be the prophet promised by Moses comes from the New Testament. For instance, one sees from sermons recorded in the book of Acts that the early disciples preached Jesus as the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 18:15. Both Peter and Stephen quote this scripture and relate it to Jesus (Acts 3:22, 7:37).

A further indication that Jesus was the "Second Moses" of Deuteronomy 18:15 is found in the New Testament in the story of the Transfiguration. The voice from the cloud pronounced Jesus to be "my son, my chosen," and commanded "to him listen" (Luke 9:35). This "to him listen" is the same command found in Deuteronomy 18:15.

From such passages in the New Testament, and from other contemporary Jewish sources, it seems clear that the title "prophet" was often used to mean more than prophet. Those who applied it to Jesus may often have used it as a synonym for the Messiah.